Review

Good Chronological History Detected but Critical Analysis on the Missing List

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BOOK REVIEW
Carolyn Carpan. 2009. *Sisters, Schoolgirls, and Sleuths: Girls' Series Books in America.* Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

Carolyn Carpan, author of *Sisters, Schoolgirls and Sleuths: Girls' Series Books in America,* is director of Public Services with the Burke Library at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York. Her role as a librarian explains both the strengths and weaknesses of this book. At its best, it offers an excellent chronology of girls' series books, and the publishing industry behind them, especially in its thorough cataloguing of books written for girls from the 1840s to the 1980s after which it trails off . *Sisters, Schoolgirls and Sleuths* is most useful as a genre study, with its reference of book titles, sometimes sentimental biographies and plot summaries, and less successful in its claims as a social history. Th e book does indeed track historical trends of the times in which the series were written and published, but lacks the necessary analysis to give it academic clout. Instead of off ering any critique, Carpan often does little more than describe the most popular American girls' series, describing their main characters (who sound remarkably alike and formulaic, a point Carpan herself makes) and summarising the plots of many of the books in some detail To her great credit, she also knows an extensive amount about the authors and major publishers of girls' series, revealing some fascinating intrigues concerning the exploitation of ghost writers, and the syndication of series under the guise of being written by one author. Written with great affection, she introduces us to the books and characters who have entertained young American readers for many years. In this respect *Sisters, Schoolgirls and Sleuths* is a charming, nostalgic, and entertaining book.

A quick and easy read, Carpan's book does a commendable job of relaying the history of girls' books in which she fi nds the common themes of friendship, family adventure, mystery and romance. But Carpan's questionable background in literary theory means she makes some naive mistakes. For instance, she makes the error of assuming girl readers are all alike and have read series' books for a common, identical reason. Consequently, it comes off as simplistic when she suggests rather defi nitively that girls keep reading series books because they come to know the characters within them so well that they must buy the next book in the series if "… [they] don't want to miss out on their friends' fun" (xi). Her oft-repeated idea that readers live vicariously through

fi ctional characters is simplistic at best. Th e weakest aspect of the book is this tentative literary analysis.

In addition, when Carpan veers away from what she calls social history to close textual analysis she regularly makes exaggerated claims and is inclined towards overstatement. She often presumes to know her authors' intent, and to prescribe meaning to fi ctional characters as though they are real, and as though all readers will understand them in the same way. For instance, her prediction about the fi ctional future of the character Dorothy Dale in the Victorian *Dorothy Dale, A Girl of To-Day* series is that "if the series had continued past Dorothy's marriage she would likely have joined the Progressive Era women reformers, working in settlement houses for poor immigrant families" (19). This kind of conjecture, which tries to apply signifi cant historical circumstances directly to the girls' books seems to go too far. It may be true that the book was written at a period of time when suff ragettes were in the news, but not *all* women were suff ragettes, of course, nor should Carpan treat the fi ctional Dorothy Dale as though she were real. There's a faulty syllogism implied in the argument that there were women reformers in what Carpan calls Th e Progressive Era therefore girls'series books ought to include women reformers. Carpan continues throughout to fall into the same trap of overstating her case, suggesting for example that if (a girls' series character) Jane Cameron was really a militant feminist, she would have been involved with the suff rage movement.
Carpan makes similar predictions about fi ctional characters whom she believes would likely have gone on to become wives and mothers. At one point she claims that during the Depression "most teen girls stayed home and sold newspapers, babysat or worked in textile mills to earn money for their families" (52). Th is again is surely an overstatement—not without some historical truth, but uneasily translated here as fact. In her criticism of the portrayals of boys in series from the 1950s, she fi nds them unrealistic because they're not the "sex-crazed teenage boys they would likely have been in real life" (87). Th e problem lies partly in tone—it would make more sense to critique the texts themselves against the backdrop of the times. Instead, Carpan tries to match the books too closely to the historical references she has found in her secondary sources.
It is clear that Carpan tries to understand fi ctional characters in order to write what she thinks of as social history, but rather than providing context, her claims to know the real lives or intentions of fi ctional characters are awkward. Th ese books are fi ction after all, and though they can be said to represent their times, they were not intended as socio-realism, nor were all boys sex-crazed. It is clear that Carpan has read widely to understand the eras in which the books she studies were written, but her assumptions that signifi cant historical circumstances would overtly appear in each of the books seems forced. As another example, she refers to "petting parties popular with teens in the 1920s"

(38) but then fi nds fl aws in her books when she seeks evidence of these (or notes their absence) in the girls' series books. Instead, it would have been more interesting to analyse in more depth (and with, perhaps, some feminist critique) the reasons why the real lived experiences of some girls were avoided as times changed, while other constructions of girls as innocent persisted.

Overall, *Sisters, Schoolgirls and Sleuths* is shaky in its feminist principles. Th e farthest Carpan goes is to note that the wealthy, marriageable girls in the early books are replaced by career girls, aff ected by historical events such as World War II, and then, fi nally, in the 1980s allowed independence (including sex lives). She does notice, as have others, that the Nancy Drew of the 1940s was, in fact, more independent than the Nancy Drew of the 1960s. But though she wants to claim that the Nancy Drew of the 1970s was revived as a second wave feminist, there's little in her literary analysis that suggests an understanding of feminism beyond noting Nancy's revived plucky attitude.

Carpan also tentatively makes reference to subtexts of sexuality, suggesting that "in the character of Madelaine Ayres, Warde makes a hidden reference to women's sexuality, which Betty completely misses" (21). It is puzzling that Carpan expects an author at the turn of the twentieth century to have written about friendships between girls as "veiled lesbian relationships" (21). Th ough that may be Carpan's twenty-fi rst century queer reading of the text, it seems unfair of her to suggest the author in question got it wrong. Th en she overlooks other more obvious opportunities for queer readings, and declines to discuss the many critiques of Nancy Drew and her friend George as queer texts. In other sections in the books she fi nds "hidden messages" (57) about sexuality, implying that they are intentional, as when she suggests that a sexual relationship between Nancy Drew and her father was inferred in the movies of the late 1930s. Th ere is not much literary theory that proposes hidden messages anymore. Had Carpan written of how the texts produced good citizens for their times or how they constructed (and still construct) ideal girlhoods *Sisters, Schoolgirls and Sleuths* might be a more useful social history.

In addition, Carpan's decisions about which series to include often seem somewhat arbitrary, especially after the 1980s. She decides not to include current popular series such as the *Twilight* series. Th ough arguably *Twilight* is not in the same genre as the detective novels, adventure stories or light romances of the other girls' series, she does include in her study R.L. Stine's *Goosebumps* series and briefl y discusses the recent interest in horror as a Young Adult (YA) genre (including *Buff y Th e Vampire Slayer*). She also writes briefl y about chick lit and about other books published as recently as 2008, which makes the omission of *Twilight* more noticeable. In general, Carpan is more confi dent discussing books from previous decades and seems sentimental, hoping, for instance, that a revival of the Cherry Ames series might "help readers

learn more about serious issues, for example war and careers" (137). Carpan ends up sounding old-fashioned herself, less feminist, somehow, than lady writer.Carpan has read widely, and clearly knows the corpus of texts in her genre, including extensive and useful biographical details of her authors. She is especially well-informed about the Sratemeyer Syndicate which published such series as Nancy Drew, of which I knew only a little and learned a lot. Her knowledge of the fi eld is demonstrated in her bibliography, though her use of secondary sources is unscholarly.

Often she introduces quotes with awkward phrasing, such as referring to many of her sources as "well-known scholars," and regularly leaves her literary sources hanging without additional critique and with poor referencing. I wanted to know more, and to read more analysis. To what, for instance, does Carpan attribute the Gothic elements in series such as the Judy Bolten series of the 1930s? What were the historical impulses then?

As a popular source of information about girls' series books *Sisters, Schoolgirls and Sleuths* off ers a useful and thorough summary. It is only as literary criticism, or feminist critique that her text falls short by making, in some ways, an unnecessary promise about the critical feminist analysis within. Nonetheless, at least Carpan points us towards the authors to read for more thorough analysis. As a compendium to girls' series books, *Sisters, Schoolgirls, and Sleuths* is commendable, and in many ways an interesting read. I just wish there were more analysis and a little less plot summary.